

Testimony of Governor Linda Lingle

Before the House Committees on Education and Judiciary

Friday, January 30, 2004

On

HB 2331

Proposing Amendments to the Constitution of the State of Hawaii
Relating to Public Education

Chairmen Takumi and Hamakawa, members of the Committee on Education and the Committee on the Judiciary.

I come before you today to testify in support of House Bill 2331, the “Let the People Decide Act of 2004”.

The purpose of this Act is simple. It is to propose an amendment to our State Constitution that would revamp the existing State public education system through the creation of seven or more independent school districts, each governed by an elected local school board.

There is widespread agreement that the current management structure in our public schools is obsolete. Your Education Committee recognized this fact almost two years ago when you voted to support a constitutional proposal to place local school boards on the ballot. I come before you today to ask that you renew your support for a constitutional amendment to allow the people to decide if they want local school boards.

The positive impact of school district size has been examined extensively. Studies of 37 states plus the District of Columbia have all reached the same conclusion. There is a direct connection between smaller school districts and higher student achievement. What is particularly exciting about these studies is the finding that smaller school districts can break the link between students from low-income households and low student achievement.

The fact that local school districts are superior to a single statewide school district does not conflict with the equally demonstrable fact that children do better in smaller classes. Both are true and any attempt to pit one against the other proposes a false choice. Bringing decision-making to the local level allows schools to decide what size their classes should be. The recipe for school success is: smaller districts, principals with decision-making authority, and money directly into the classroom.

Local school boards made up of concerned parents and citizens who know their individual communities are the key. Local boards can provide nurturing and support for their teachers and principals. Local boards can craft policies that recognize the difference between a school in Waiakea, Hawaii and a school in Waipahu on Oahu. Local boards can provide oversight for the one and one-half billion dollars that will go directly to the schools when 90% of all money flows into the classroom.

A constitutional proposal to expand the size and geographic representation of the existing school board is also before you. History has shown that tinkering with the current system has not achieved the results our students deserve. If your committees deem it prudent to place this issue on the ballot, then we simply ask that you also give voters the choice of supporting local schools boards by also placing this question on the ballot.

Local school boards exist in every other state in our nation. We have heard from school officials across the United States who work, and work effectively, with local school boards. The words of the executive director for the Oregon State Board of Education say it best, “I don’t think anyone could imagine us without a local school board. It is an opportunity for 1,500 people to be involved in local government.”

As I shared with you on Monday, the people of Hawaii have placed their trust in us, their elected leaders. Let us show that we trust them to be a part of their own government.

I am asking you today to give the voters of our State the opportunity to choose a brighter future for their children by putting this clear and concise question on the November ballot:

“SHALL THE EXISTING PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM BE REFORMED BY REPLACING THE EXISTING DEPARTMENT AND BOARD OF EDUCATION WITH AT LEAST SEVEN ELECTED LOCAL SCHOOLS BOARDS?”

Let the people of our great State decide.